

Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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December 2012

**Thai Identity and its Relationship to Spirituality within the context of
Contemporary Art: Transformation of Faith and Belief to Images**

**An exegesis submitted in (partial) fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Fine Art**

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With English being my second language I have found the writing of this exegesis both exciting and challenging. Given this challenge I feel I have achieved a great deal during my research candidature. My aim is that this research will make a productive and creative contribution to ongoing debates of identity, hybridity, multiculturalism, cultural and religious influences, as evidenced in contemporary art practice.

Abstract

This practice lead doctoral research project explores my spirituality and its relationship to Thai identity, Buddhist background and conversion to Christianity through a series of paintings. The project has two aims, one, to further develop my practice and style of painting, two, to answer the proposed research question, that addresses the knowledge and symbolism of Buddhist and Christian beliefs and the subsequent use of religious imagery within contemporary art practice. Themes investigated occurred through processes of painting, a considered use of narrative, the symbolism of colour, pictorial structure and content. This project will consider the progression of my work and artistic style through four bodies of work:

The series of Faith and Belief no. 1- 4

Searching for Self-awareness no. 1

Searching for self-awareness no. 2 - 3

Searching for self-awareness no. 4 - no. 6

Art works presented have contributed towards the development of the recent series *Spiritual Identity* which is comprised of two works: *Spiritual Identity: Inner Land* and *Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories 1 - 3*, a series of works that are symbolic of the culmination of the exploration of my spiritual and cultural identity.

Research project development

Project 1: Storytelling through self-exploration of identity “in a new context”.

Supporting material: The series of *Faith and Belief* and *Searching for Self-awareness no. 1*

My analysis of previous works determined the purpose of this project-based research. Initial investigations for my doctoral research resulted in the *Faith and Belief* series, paintings concerned with Christian symbolism. I produced the painting, *Searching for Self-Awareness no. 1* in order to contextualise the transformation of my spirituality to images, specifically through the use of Christian imagery. As such, I view series no. 1 as the starting point for my investigation of my own hybrid cultural and spiritual identity and the expression of this identity through my painting.

In *Searching for Self-Awareness no. 1* I chose to reduce the complexities of form within my painting. The construction of this first painting involved minor changes: the use of less complex labyrinths, the limitation of posing figures, and a selective use of Christian signs and symbols.

My paintings deal with concepts of telling stories. To reflect the idea of telling stories I entitled the series ‘*Searching for self-awareness*’ as a way to express my spiritual identity as shaped by my Buddhist background and later conversion to Christianity.

I aimed to convey the dilemma of Thai Christian artist experiencing alienation in an unfamiliar environment. Further, I embarked on an exploration of my inner self through my art practice to gain further understanding of what it means to be a Thai artist in working in a Western art context. I refer to my experiences as the exploration of my identity “in the new context”, a specific and subjective term that I will use to discuss the multiple forms of displacement I experience as a Thai Christian artist in Australia.

Project 2: The investigation of Thai identity through the use of Buddhist and Christian symbols and techniques of Thai traditional painting.

Supporting material: *Searching for self-awareness no. 2 and no. 3*

After revisiting *Searching for self-awareness no. 1*, I produced a series of sketches and a small painting, *Searching for self-awareness no. 2*. I then completed a full-sized painting *Searching for self-awareness no. 3*. In the production of series 1 and 2 I aimed to extend and redefine my style of painting and through this process further clarify my identity as a Thai and its relationship to spirituality. I was pursuing the aims of my practice with a consideration of the history and development of Thai contemporary art.

The work from project 2 incorporated both Buddhist and Christian symbolism: the begging bowl (monks bowl), the ladder, lotus flower and labyrinths, and stylised portraits of myself. I employed the same techniques as with the project one: a limited palette with incremental brush-stroke, and defining forms with pen. I found that my use of colour was more sophisticated in project two, works served to provide a sense of unity and emotional expression. In addition, I found the symbols that I used in this series to be more tangible and to contain further signposts in the search for, and representation of, my spiritual identity.

In the series of works made for project 2, I incorporated techniques taken from Thai traditional art and Buddhist and Christian symbolism. I experimented with the use of constructional backgrounds to separate each scene (as 'state' of portraits) in my painting. The techniques I used reflected Thai mural wall paintings, in which various scenes on each wall are distinguished by line and direction. Further, the texture created by the use of incremental brush-stroke in the portrait elements of the work was a new technique, which reflected the work's exploration of themes and elements utilised in Thai art. Many Thai artists who choose to work neatly, step by step, stroke by stroke to build up or define the form, employ the incremental brush stroke. In this series I also chose to replace the cylinder container used in previous works with symbol of the begging bowls. The begging bowls presence in the work and its relationship to the lotus flower symbol (either within the flower or outside of it) indicated a shift in my state of mind toward Buddhism. The cylinder container had

previously been used to represent a vessel that could contain my soul, my sins or my fantasies.

Project 3: The harmony of spirituality related to displacement and location.

Supporting material: *Searching for self-awareness no. 4 to no. 6*

At this stage of the project my aim was to investigate the balance of Buddhist and Christian symbolism in my work as a vehicle for representing my personal experiences, spirituality, cultural hybridity, and multiculturalism within the new context, Melbourne, Australia. In this exegesis I will also be exploring the relationship of themes to Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, multiculturalism and other theories outlined in chapter 3.

I created *Searching for self-awareness no. 4* in order to investigate my ability to balance both Buddhist and Christian symbolism, while to some extent limiting the use of Christian symbolism. In the work, I focused on Buddhist symbolism such as the begging bowl to represent my state of mind, especially in the past, and attempted to create continuity by making the focal point of this picture, my portrait. In project 3 works, the portrait symbolises my current spiritual status as a recent conversion to Christianity. The exploration of the portrait element I use raised further questions regarding the use of Christian symbolism in my work. In exploring Christian symbolism, it is my intention to experiment and play with the idea of 'understatement': the absence of clear signs and symbols that suggest symmetry. I am instead creating unclear signs and a sense of unbalanced symbolism. In doing so, I seek to bring greater clarity to my artistic style (as mentioned in project 2).

In *Searching for self-awareness no. 5*, I intended to continue my exploration of my own spirituality within the new homeland of Australia. I experienced a confused state of identity after relocating from Thailand to Melbourne, Australia. Further, I experienced a lack of clarity in terms of my identity as an artist. As a Thai artist from a Buddhist background that had recently come to believe in Christianity, I felt a sense of displacement created by the relationship of this identity to the dominant culture.

At this stage I challenged myself to create a single piece of painting that would express these various feelings of displacement. I began with a set of drawings on

canvas, which were primarily painted with yellow ochre. To investigate further the spiritual elements of this period in my life, I created *Searching for self-awareness no. 6*. My central intention with *Searching for self-awareness no. 6* was to interpret the impact of religious hybridisation on my spiritual growth. While at the same time providing a clear picture of my personal spiritual status through the use of metaphorical imagery of my religious hybridisation and spiritual growth. The use of Buddhist and Christian symbolism has played a significant role throughout this research project. However, during my investigations I came to realise that the issue of my identity also needed to be considered in terms of my relationship within what I understood to be a dominant culture. It was important to consider how my relationship with Australia was being represented in my work. The mixed cultural representation used in my work, illustrates layers of my belief, which have developed through various states of displacement. Dependent on location, I am both the displaced member in my own land as a member of the religious minority, Christian, and also displaced in the foreign culture of Australia as a Thai emigrant, despite being a part of the dominant religion in Australia.

In *Searching for self-awareness no. 6*, the use of Buddhist and Christian symbolism becomes more harmonious, reflecting the self-realisation I experienced in terms of background and recent belief. The use and positioning of the begging bowl in series no. 6 is a key device employed to describe the story of the progression of my belief. From foreground to background, the positions of the begging bowls reflect each moment of my life at a particular time and the relationship of these moments to each other as part of a coherent whole. In the past, my spirituality was heavily Buddhist influenced but this has decreased over time, and is imbued with a sense of nostalgia. The isolated begging bowl in the background of the work represents this. Over the course of my life journey to the present day, religious teaching has influenced my way of life, with a greater emphasis on Christianity in the present, this is conveyed in the painting by the figure inside the begging bowl holding a bell shape container and another begging bowl. Further, three levels of connection with the spiritual are indicated by the ladders and their direction from the top of the work. These represent my personal spiritual growth and the three central elements I see as being relevant to this: my own life goals, the Buddhist goal of attaining nirvana and the Christian goal of attaining heaven, or a state of living in harmony with God. The foreground

with the begging bowl standing, and its relation to the main figure as focal point, reflects my own sense of meaning in life across time. In the work, I also aimed to indicate through the positioning of these symbols, that another process of transformation might be possible in the future.

Project 4: Spiritual Identity: Inner Land, and the overlay of memories 1 - 3, a case study of Colin McCahon and other relevant theories.

Supporting material: *Spiritual Identity: Inner Land* and *Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories No. 1- 3*

This stage of the project began with an analysis of my previous works and consideration of their content in comparison with other art practitioners. In particular, I found resonance with the work of Colin McCahon; a New Zealand artist whose work explores personal experiences in terms of faith and belief and their relationship with the contemporary art world.

In my own work I have used experimental practice such as drawing, painting, digital printing, sculpture, overlay imaging, etc. to address the issue of my identity. This process was most clearly evidenced in my latest works, particularly *Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories No. 1 - 3*.

The use of the concept of “overlay memories”: seeing my past through my present and the balance of life as the balance of light and shadow has played a significant role in my recent body of work. Colin McCahon explores similar concepts in his work. This is most readily seen in McCahon’s landscape painting from the exhibition entitled *Question of life*. Marja Bloem and Martin Browne (2002) note that “What McCahon called his interest in landscape as a symbol of place and also the human condition.” Furthermore, my use of “overlay imaging” has developed from early experimental practices to become a more useful and effective technique in creating my personal contemporary visual language.

Ultimately, I am producing my most recent work with the aim of answering a specific question: In what ways can I represent my current concept of identity and its relationships to spirituality and culture through the use of personal symbolism to reflect a universal concern? I see this as a progression from the several questions I have aimed to address in the production of previous works.

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Chapter one: Introduction

A self-exploration of spirituality and its relationship to Christianity and Thai identity.

This research-based project explores the complexities of my spirituality and its relationship to Thai identity, Christianity and culture. I will investigate selected knowledge and symbolism of Buddhist and Christian belief and their transformation to images within the context of contemporary art. As an artist and researcher I use narrative, symbolism of images, colour, pictorial structure and content to address issues regarding my identity and spiritual self.

Background:

Originally, my background was Buddhist due to my family upbringing in Thailand, Buddhism is the majority national religion and ninety-four per cent of Thailand's population, practice Theravada Buddhism.¹ My family is Buddhist; in contrast, I converted to Christianity in 1998.

Once I had no one in my life to consult with about my spirituality. Until, I felt fulfilled by God's words by reading the Bible. Then, I found myself in a different world and my life had changed. I believe that I have become part of God's family by believing in Jesus's redemption on the cross and his existence. Furthermore, I believe I received the gift from God to be able to create art. Art for me is the medium I use to communicate and propagate Gods abiding love to people. I use art to represent my identity, spiritual belief and culture. For example during meditation I am relieved from tension and problems faced in my daily life, also through my devotion to painting and making spiritual images.

As Jessica Walker commented on my practice,

In the research seminar I spoke about the sense of devotion and painstaking-ness that is evident in the work. This is achieved through the work's scale and detail among other elements.

¹ Asia time online: South East Asia news. (2007). *Crow art has Thai Monks Flapping*.
retrieved from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IK15AeO1.html

I appreciated that while Ohm's work is highly personal and concerned with his own inward journey from Buddhism to Christianity, it is open enough for the viewer to draw on his or her ideas and relationship with the work.²

Juan Ford also commented,

Upon closer scrutiny and reflection, the personal transition from Thai Buddhism to Christianity would be unique for any single person, and it appears that the resulting work is in a way, a map, or perhaps a non-chronological depiction of this private experience.

His work does not attempt to relate the transformative experience of anyone but himself, while making welcome (if unlikely) reference to artists such M.C. Escher.³

This is the project's strength.....A final point is in recognition of the devotion in time taken to complete Ohm's intricate and labour-intensive work. To me this is an important component to the work that while not being directly related to the imagery and structures employed, nevertheless is in harmony with the intentions of the project.⁴

While Escher shares a compositional strategy of using structures, in the themes of his work as seen in figure1, page 7, I use labyrinths and structures as a way to express my spiritual identity.

² Walker, J (personal communication, October, 2009)

As a reviewer reported in response to the presentation of Doctoral Seminar, Semester one 2009, School of Art, RMIT, Melbourne

³ See, M.C. Escher The Official Website, Retrieved from <http://www.mcescher.com>

Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972), He played with architecture, perspective and impossible spaces. In his work we recognize his keen observation of the world around us and the expressions of his own fantasies. M.C. Escher shows us that reality is wondrous, comprehensible and fascinating

⁴ Ford, J (personal communication, October, 2009)

As a reviewer reported in response to the presentation of Doctoral Seminar, Semester one 2009, School of Art, RMIT, Melbourne

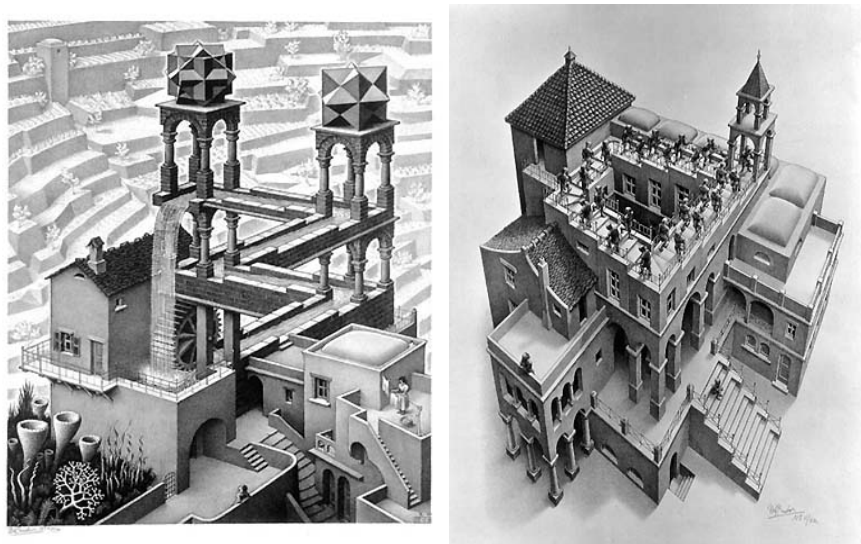


Figure 1: Works of M.C. Escher, Left: '*Waterfall*', Lithograph, 38 x 30 cm, 1961. Right: '*Ascending and Descending*', Lithograph, 35.5 x 28.5 cm, 1960

All M.C. Escher works © 2013 The M.C. Escher Company - the Netherlands. All rights reserved. Used by permission. www.mcescher.com

In this research project, I investigate my spiritual complexities related to my Buddhist background and recent conversion to Christianity, as well as its transformation through the imagery of painting within the context of contemporary art.

The Buddhist signs and symbols that I selected are the begging bowl, which symbolizes Buddha, Stupa that represents the enlightened mind of the Buddha, lotus, which symbolizes the purity and spontaneous generation and hence divine birth; Lotus is the one of the most poignant representations of Buddhist teaching.⁵ My research is interested in the investigation of a balance between both my Buddhist and Christian belief in order to find a solution to its appropriate representation. In addition, I explore the interconnection between Thai traditional art and contemporary art to find a harmony in my painting. My research investigates the possibilities of spiritual transformation through painting, drawing, digital and mixed media works.

According to a panel discussion on "Thai-ness in Modern Thai Art" (1989), the speakers highlighted the difficulties of a regional Thai contemporary art, being recognized in a more global context. For instance, there is an argument about

⁵ See, General Buddhist Symbols, Retrieved from http://viewonbuddhism.org/general_symbols_buddhism.html

Thai-ness⁶: Many artists who have adapted to concepts of western culture have already applied it to their own style, and in doing so their art may be locally and internationally appreciated, however I believe they may risk being accused of losing a national identity.

Japanese art critic, Tani Arata (cited in Wisasinee, 2004) states that,

Thai artist is different from Japanese; Thai artists are good at applying western wisdom into their own traditional knowledge in terms of concept, technique, art making and critique. Arata spoke of how it may be beneficial but at the same time lead to the lack of ability to create their own style.⁷

This research project aims to answer the question of how can Thai identity within my personal spiritual belief and cultural interplays be depicted in a contemporary art context? My aim is that this project may draw attention to how knowledge is represented in art, and relates to different cultures.

⁶ Poshyananda, A. (1992). *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Panel discussion on "Thai-ness in Modern Thai Art" at Silpakorn University, Bangkok, 19 June 1989. The speakers were Chulathat Phyakhrannonda, Preecha Thaonthong, Kamchorn Soonpongsri, and Apinan Poshyananda

⁷ See, Wisasineekul, J. (2004). *Power of Critic: Visual Art*. Bangkok



Figure 2: The series of '*Faith and belief: Assembly of love no. 1- 4*', 2007-2008, 150 x 180 cm, 162 x 245 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas

Chapter Two: Project one

Storytelling through self-exploration of identity “in a new context”.

Supporting material: the series of *Faith and Belief* and *Searching for self-awareness no.1*.

Introduction:

In order to investigate the use of personal experiences in relationship to Buddhist and Christian beliefs, I responded to this research by way of telling a story through a self-exploration of identity, through aspects of related theories such as:

- 1) Stuart Hall's theory regarding cultural identity, cultural roots.
- 2) Araeen Rasheed's argument to Stuart Hall's theory.
- 3) 'Telling a story' (Guston, P. cited by Les Morgan, 2008) and 'significant form theory' (Normand, cited by Morgan, 2008).

I studied Stuart Hall's theory regarding cultural identity and his concept of cultural roots and then Araeen Rasheed's response to Stuart Hall's ideas.

I found that Stuart Hall's theory regarding cultural identity leads me to further understand my work. As Araeen Rasheed (2000, p.3-20) noted Hall's understanding of each artwork, through the idea of cultural roots, should be seen not only as cultural identity but also the consideration of one's work within the context of multiculturalism. Hall describes that the understanding of a work of art can be determined through the investigation of particular cultural identities. Rasheed asserted Hall's perspective is informed by the content of the work. Hall suggested that personal experience as part of a cultural process can help an artist who lives in a different context to their heritage to participate in modernity.

To clarify the association between Hall and Rasheed's ideas of cultural identity with my research, Hall and Araeen lead me to the idea of the exploration of my identity, not only through spirituality but also in terms of cultural origins to articulate my personal experience. In doing so, I use Hall's understanding of artist's works to investigate my own understanding and develop my research project through my personal experiences. Rasheed's argument to Hall's cultural identity suggests not

only studying cultural identity but to also consider the context of multiculturalism and its ideology. In addition, Araeen Rasheed asserted that personal experiences can be just an aspect of an artists' work. Hall asserted that artists can identify themselves when they encounter or experience modernity.

Through the studying of 'Telling a story' (Guston, P. cited by Les Morgan, 2008) and 'significant form theory' (Normand cited by Morgan, 2008), in order to explore my cultural identity through personal experiences, my DFA studio practice can be seen as my cultural laboratory, my case study; The series of Faith and Belief: assembly of love is concerned with stories of telling people about my love of God, as a way to take me through life's complexities and lead me to the realization of sharing. In Searching for Self-awareness I am interested in my identity and its relationships to my Buddhist background and conversion to Christianity, and the issue of displacement. Living in different places, from Thailand, the UK, New Zealand, and Melbourne I create art to investigate my spirituality and my methods of making. As a new believer of Christianity I found myself being in the middle of nowhere, which led me to the creation of Searching for self-awareness, as a way to gain self-realisation through making art.

'Telling a story' (Guston, P. cited by Les Morgan, 2008) and 'significant form theory' (Normand cited by Morgan, 2008) is my rationale to express my personal experience in terms of spirituality. It is my intention to represent my identity as a logo of Thai and Christian, by which I refer to as my badge. I intend to use this term as a metaphorical device for hybrid culture.

My research started with my studio practice through the concept of 'Telling the Stories' in order to analyse my previous works which were produced during the year 2007-2008, the series of the Faith and Belief: the Assembly of Love, in which my personal experience as a Christian played a crucial role in these paintings.

Cited by Les Morgan, 'Telling Stories' for Phillip Guston (1913-80) was not limiting aesthetically: it was the rationale for the work. In other words, the stories or content ultimately determined the form, as American sculptor Jimmie Durham asserts, 'painting is not advertising' (Durham, 1993 p.69). According to Normand (1992, p.34) cited by Les Morgan (2008, p.21), stated that 'significant form' was based on the capacity of form to produce emotion. Normand's theory led to the

condition that 'lines and colours combined in a particular way, as forms have the potential to stir our aesthetic emotions.

Through this investigation, I found that the series of Faith and Belief: the Assembly of Love was the interpretation of my belief and faith in Christianity. The signs and symbols played a crucial role as a practical and metaphorical device to present my identity as a visual language to begin exploring the construction of my identity.

Furthermore, analysis of previous works led me to conduct the investigation regarding my hybrid identity. I produced the first painting, '*Searching for Self-Awareness no. 1*' in order to contextualise the process of art and its related information through the transformation of images. In doing so, I chose to reduce the complexities of form within my painting as seen in the previous works. The construction of this first painting in the research project was a minor change as seen in the use of less complex labyrinths, the limitation of designed posing figures, and the selective signs and symbols related to Christianity.

The concept 'searching for self-awareness' aims to express a state of mind, which represents my identity in terms of spirituality within a Buddhist background and the conversion to Christianity. In other words, I intended to convey the dilemma of a Thai Christian artist and feelings of alienation. Furthermore, I explored my beliefs in order to gain knowledge of being a Thai artist who wishes to interpret or convey a personal experience through aspects of western art styles and cultural themes.

In terms of studio methods, as Les Morgan (2008) stated that:

I wanted to produce images that could be easily read, and this necessitated the development of a painting style that was more direct and economical than I had previously employed (p.113-114).

My research process for these works was primarily informed by my personal experience as a displaced artist.

In my studio practice, I wanted to develop my painting style as a universal understanding to further develop the use of references, signs and symbols, techniques etc, I wanted to crystalise the idea of being a stranger in my homeland,

being Christian in a dominant Buddhist country. Furthermore to develop my art and expression of my Thai identity within contemporary art practice.



Figure 3: '*Searching for self awareness*', acrylic and pen on canvas, 150 x 180 cm, 2009

Chapter Three: Project Two and Three

The series of *Searching for self-awareness*, investigation of Thai art and the harmony of spirituality relating to issues of displacement.

Introduction:

I believe it is important for my project and my sense of history and belonging to undertake a brief analysis of Thai art, in particular the transformative years of early modernism.

By looking at the heritage of my cultural background I can clearly see the links to my project, and consider stylistic similarities between my work and the past.

An analysis of Thai historical visual art is not to be seen here as inclusive or deeply theoretical in relationship to my project, but to see my practice as a kind of continuum.

The classic period of Thai art 'Ayudhya' show Buddha figures that show a strong sense of stylization, a strong linear refinement and a feeling of mass or bulk that has a divine spiritual quality. The earlier 7th century-figures in "temple of Champa" also show the elegant stylization, serenity, introspective and divine distortions of the figure. Despite Western influence the qualities of this stylization persist with works such as Khien Yimsiri's "Magic Flute" 1949.

I believe that the influences from other cultures, particularly the West have changed Thai art. However the consistent 'Thai-ness' of figurative imagery has remained. I feel my work extends and reinforces the introspective, spiritual stylisation of the Buddha-like figures, the mass of form and elegance of line and multi layered meanings and compositions present in much of Thailand's classic artworks.

I investigated my use of painting, drawing, digital and mixed media works to develop a unique visual language regarding concepts of personal identity, self-awareness, spirituality and cultural identity. My practice included an investigation into the use of traditional and new technologies in relation to personal symbolism.

I also researched and interpreted selected aspects of Christian and Buddhist iconography to transform these into a personal visual language. I investigated aspects of Thai traditional art and their relevance to my personal iconography, to conduct research through:

1. The investigation of the knowledge of the symbolism of Buddhist and Christian idioms, as well as the interconnection between Thai traditional art influences and contemporary art.

2. To relate to Thai identity regarding spirituality and its transformation to a contemporary visual language.

I discuss the use of symbolism: the interpretation of select Buddhist and Christian imagery, in a poetic subtle manner rather than through explicit narrative imagery. My images are made for contemplation, reverie, spiritual and conceptual thought.

I studied related theories, such as

- 1) Waterbury's theory regarding style.

- 2) Aspects of Thai art.

- 3) Thai culture and theories such as, Bhabha's hybridity and multiculturalism and Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's response to Bhabha's ideas. Bhabha's theory of postcolonialism and semicolonialism hybridities, Thasnai Sethaseree's theory of Thai culture development process, Pattana, Peter A. Jackson and Bhabha's theory of the development of Thai Culture-Siwilai-civilisation, Vichoke Mukdamanee and Pairoj Jamuni's theory of the development of Thai contemporary art.

Project 2: The investigation of Thai identity through the use of Buddhist and Christian symbols and techniques of Thai traditional painting:

I started my second project, *Searching for Self-Awareness no. 2 and no. 3* in order to identify my style of painting as my identity. My works are subjective and represent my inner thoughts influenced by working in my new temporary homeland, Australia. In other words, I am conveying the complexities of spirituality through my style of painting that signify Thai identity and personal experiences. In

doing so, I investigated Waterbury's theory of style and identify, Thai art and its relationship to my own practice.

According to Waterbury (1959), style always consists of three qualities, authority, understatement, and implication. Authority is the physical essence of style that depends on linear quality. Second, understatement, the absence of everything extraneous or superfluous, and the employment of suggestion (1959, p193-198), it is not necessary for artists to disclose the actual significance but interpret the distortion. Last, implication,

Waterbury asserted that,

Implication is the point at which the artist and his work most completely fuse, a point which is the enclosing atmosphere. To create this an artist must believe intensely in the significance. Artists of the Far East had this quality of belief, which is actually a religious emotion, enabling them to depict perfect serenity, detachment or, at the very least, pre-occupation (Waterbury, F. 1959. Reflections on Style. *Artibus Asiae*, 22(1/2), 193-198).

I believe that there are significant similarities in this spiritual approach between the traditional arts of Far East, China, Japan, and Korea with South East Asian countries, including Thailand, and Indonesia.

Waterbury stated the similarity between Asian art is characterised by their spiritual belief and artistic skills, style and linear quality (Authority), and distortion (Understatement) therefore leads to Implication, the point of harmony in their work. This similarity of style in Asian art of different nations can be seen in the sculpture of India and Indonesia. Waterbury notes this, suggesting that there is a commonality of aesthetics found in the sculptural work of the Temple of Champa, which dates back to the seventh century: Waterbury and others noted,

She wears a tall Mukuta on her head; her only garments are necklaces, bracelets, and girdles of pearls. Her left elbow is out of joint; this curious 'distortion' is still considered beautiful today in South-east Asia and Indonesia, and may be seen among Cambodian, Thai, Balinese, and Javanese dancers. The observer acquires a taste for it...The linear quality of the dancer is extraordinary. The lines flow upward ...She has that

combination of movement-in-repose, or repose-in-action which only Far Eastern sculptures seem able to achieve (Waterbury, F. 1959. Reflections on Style. *Artibus Asiae*, 22(1/2), 193-198).

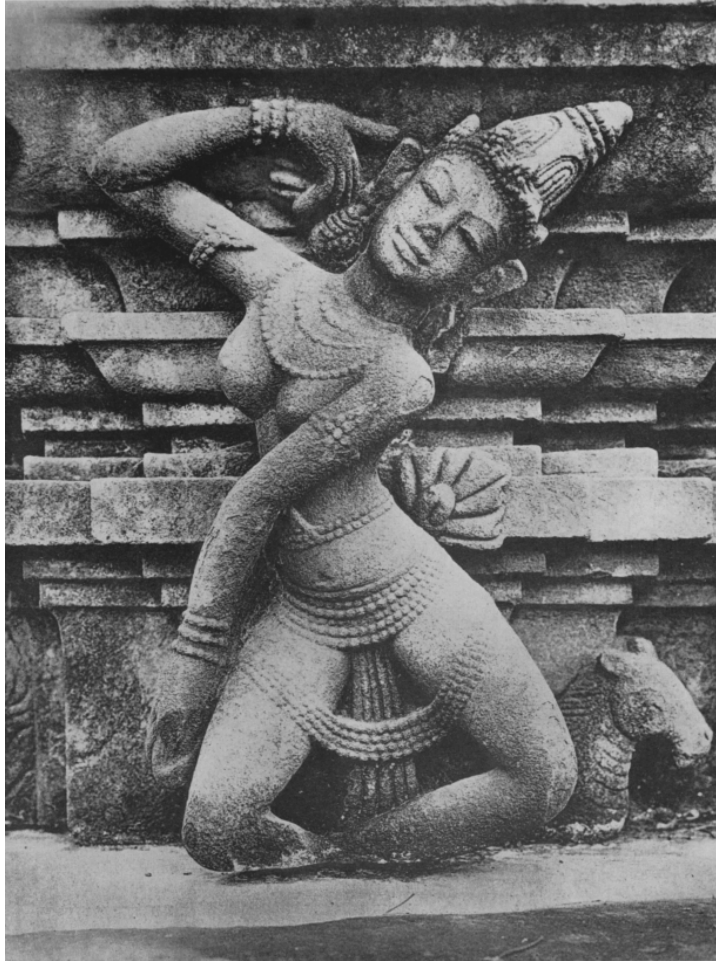


Figure 4: image of sculptural work of ' *Temple of Champa* ', which dates back to the seventh century
© <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3249157> (*Artibus Asiae* © 1959)

For this project, I developed my painting by combining the Thai Tradition of art and modern art practice to create my own style. Furthermore, I continued to explore the history of Thai Art and investigated Thai contemporary art in the development of my research project:

Vichoke Mukdamanee (2008) concluded that:

Thai contemporary art has continued from the reign of King Rama IV, when Western culture was introduced in an attempt to save the country from colonization, until the reigns of King Rama V and VI when the importance of the Thai cultural heritage was more generally acknowledged. At times, Thai

art has brought new perspectives to the Thai society...It also plays a monitoring role every time there is political or social change.⁸

Pairoj Jamuni (1993) asserted that Thai contemporary art began with the concept of cultural assimilation, in context to Western colonization, that Thailand was achieved through 'becoming civilized' (Jamuni, P. 1993. Silpa Bhirasri: The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand. *Silpakorn University Journal*, September 1992-February 1993,1-20).

Vichoke (2008) also highlighted,

Traditional Thai Art is inspired by Buddhist belief and related literature, especially from the Ayudhya period, 1367-1767, (Golden age of Thai culture in the ancient time). Art such as mural paintings, ancient scriptures, images and statues of Buddha, artefacts, and architecture were unified. The development of Thai art slightly changed during the reign of King Rama I and during King Rama III (1782-1851).⁹

During the reign of King Rama III significant trade occurred with the West resulting in a gradual cultural shift in what was the Kingdom of Siam.

Piroj (1993) stated,

This started with China, then expanded to European countries during the reigns of King 'Rama IV (1851-1868) and King Rama VI (1910-1925), which led to national developments and changes in terms of art and culture. Evidence of Western influence in Thai Art can be seen since the reign of King Rama IV, the adoption of western style architecture such as new palaces, shop houses and residential buildings. Western applications of perspective, colour, light and shadow technique were used and influenced local artists.

⁸ Mukdamanee, V. (2008). Chapter 9: Development of Contemporary Art in Thailand. In Joubert, L. (Ed), *Educating in the Arts- the Asian Experience: Twenty-Four Essays*: pp.135-143

⁹ Mukdamanee, V. 2008. Chapter 9: Development of Contemporary Art in Thailand. In Joubert, L. (Ed), *Educating in the Arts- the Asian Experience: Twenty-Four Essays*: pp.135-143

The Artist, “Khrua In Khong” depicted local townscapes, using these new western innovations. The introduction of western ideas led to changes in education, and other cultural developments.¹⁰

As Vichoke (2008) continues to state,

Even though, western philosophy, beliefs and ideas were introduced into Thai society and played a crucial role in changes, it was limited due to the ability of the Thai King and the elites who chose to adopt the positive knowledge of Western practice to balance with the strength of Thai heritage. This leads to a harmony of cultural diversity that informed Thai identity in terms of art, without decreasing or ruining Thai roots.¹¹

Vichoke (2008) also noted that the development of contemporary art in Thailand can be divided into 10 categories.

1 Art Institutes in the Early Days

1.1 Modern Art Institutes and Realism

2 The National Art Exhibition

3 From Realism to Diversity

4 Semi-Abstract Art

5 From Contemporary Art to Internationalism

6 Art for Social Criticism and Art for Life

7 Presentations of New Materials and Methods

8 The Expansion in the Study of Art and Contemporary Art for the Young Generation

9 Multiculturalism in the Borderless World

10 The Economic Crisis and Contemporary Art in the Thai Way of Living:

¹⁰ Jamuni, P. 1993. Silpa Bhirasri: The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand. *Silpakorn University Journal*, September 1992-February 1993, 1-20

¹¹ Mukdamanee, V. 2008. Chapter 9: Development of Contemporary Art in Thailand. In Joubert, L. (Ed), *Educating in the Arts- the Asian Experience: Twenty-Four Essays*: pp.135-143

For my research project 1.1, 3 and 9 of Vichoke's categories are of particular importance. According to Paroj Jamuni (1993) training in Thai craftsmanship in the past was the traditional way of passing down knowledge from elders and Buddhist monks to crafts department in the palace called "Chang Sip Moo" as the craftsmen were educated in Thai art and ancient traditions.

Vichoke (2008) asserted that,

1.1 Modern Art Institutes and Realism

The modern art school was shaped by Thai craftsmen using western style sculpting techniques and creating Buddha images influenced by the Sukhothai period' (Jamuni, P. 1993. Silpa Bhirasri: The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand. *Silpakorn University Journal*, September 1992-February 1993, 1-20)

Further, Pairoj Jamuni (1993) notes that,

The school's syllabus featured two types of subjects— one theoretical, the other practical... [It] stressed intensive practical work in both western and Thai art, such that the graduates were equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to professionally engage in both areas (p.1-20).

Professor Bhirasri believed that training in western realist art must be undertaken, while at the same time fostering a sense and understanding of traditional Thai art stemming from the students' cultural roots. In this way, the two traditions merged to enable Thai artists to create unique contemporary works (Jamuni, P. 1993. Silpa Bhirasri: The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand. *Silpakorn University Journal*, September 1992- February 1993, 1-20).

Silpa Bhirasri's approach to training a new generation of Thai artists supported and introduced the concept of cultural harmony of west and east to Thai society. Further, it was the catalyst for a transformation of the collective Thai identity. The influence of Thai contemporary art was increasingly felt beyond the borders of artists and art circles, reaching ordinary citizens. The next generation of Thai artists were then able to adopt this mix of cultural heritages as their own (Jamuni, P. 1993. Silpa Bhirasri: The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand. *Silpakorn University Journal*, September 1992-February 1993, 1-20).

Vichoke (2008) noted that,

3 From Realism to Diversity

Many Thai artists were granted scholarships enabling them to study western art abroad in Europe, America, and Britain and returned home with this knowledge. Artists who visited Italy in particular, brought the influences of impressionism, post-impressionism, and cubism. This experience, coupled with training in realism, led to a further progression for Thai art (p.135-143).

This period in the history of Thai art saw more creative, imaginative interpretations of nature that went further than a direct imitation of nature seen in the past. However, acceptance and enthusiasm for this style of work was still enjoyed in limited society (p.135-143).

Thai modern art moved forward constantly and become more substantially progressive in the first decade of the reign of King Bhumibol (1946-1956). The result was the presentation of a modern and universal perspective, which at the same time maintained their Thai roots (p.135-143).

The extension from the adoption of realism to other art genres can be observed in works of art exhibited in The National Exhibition of Art during the period. Jamuni (1993) examines a selection of works to identify the Bhirasri educational influences on Thai art (p.1-20).

Jamuni also asserts that,

Bhirasri's students created numerous avant-garde works. For example, *Kaki Riding a Garuda* (1949) was produced to reflect the theme of ancient Thai literature and communicates the value, thoughts and spirit of eastern knowledge, particularly with regard to anatomy, but utilises a western art style. The *Last Quest* (1950) reveals clearly some influence taken from Rodin. This influence can also be observed across mediums, for example in the work of Thai sculptor Khien Yimsiri (Jamuni, P. 1993. *Silpa Bhirasri: The Father of Contemporary Art in Thailand. Silpakorn University Journal*, September 1992-February 1993, 1-20).



Figure 5: Left: 1st Thai National Exhibition of Art, 1949. Right: Artist, Khien Yimsiri, “*Magic Flute*”, 1949, Bronze, 55 x 38 cm, 1st Prize, Gold Medal, Sculpture, The 1st National Exhibition of Art, 1949, Collection: National Museum Silpa Bhirasri Memorial¹²

© First image: “Review and Artworks of Silpa Bhirasri”, Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2002 pp. 28. Second Image: http://www.geocities.ws/bharnii/khien_p1.html (Copyright © 2000 bharnii)

Vichoke (2008) highlighted that,

9 Multiculturalism in the Borderless World

Along with political and economic growth (1950-1973)¹³, there has come an influx of international culture and ideas to Thailand as communication technology makes the world smaller and quicker moving (p.135-143). The Thai art scene is no exception to this...many go back to their roots, their national heritage-to find stimulation...Some artists become successful in their new means of expression, while many are challenged about the quality and originality of their work and questioned as to whether they are too greatly influenced by the outside world (2008, p.135-143).

However, the value of multiculturalism can be viewed in different ways. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) note that related space, place, and culture and

¹² See, First image: *Review and Artworks of Silpa Bhirasri*. Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2002, p.28. Second Image: http://www.geocities.ws/bharnii/khien_p1.html

¹³ See, Thailand Development Research Institute. (2002). *Thailand's Economic Growth: A Fifty Years Perspective (1950-2000)*, Retrieved from <http://www.tu.ac.th>

their association, can result in significant problems and a 'disjuncture of place and culture'.¹⁴

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) also suggested that,

The fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands. Related to border inhabitants are those who live a life of border crossings-migrant workers, nomads, and members of the transnational business and professional elite (p.6-23).

Finally, there are those who cross borders more or less permanently-immigrants, refugees, exiles, and expatriates. In their case, the disjuncture of place and culture is especially clear. (1992, p.6-23.)

Further that this experience can be observed across different border cultures:

Khmer refugees in the United States take "Khmer culture" with them in the same complicated way that Indian immigrants in England transport "Indian culture" to their new homeland.¹⁵

Looking deeper into both Gupta and Ferguson's assertion (1992), they noted that:

A second set of problems raised by the implicit mapping of cultures onto places..."Multiculturalism" is both a feeble acknowledgement of the fact that cultures have lost their moorings in definite places and an attempt to subsume this plurality of cultures within the framework of a national identity (p.6-23).

Similarly, the idea of "subcultures" attempts to preserve the idea of distinct "cultures" while acknowledging the relation of different cultures to a dominant culture within the same geographical and territorial space. Conventional accounts of ethnicity...rely on an unproblematic link between identity and place (1992, p.6-23).

¹⁴ Ferguson, J., Gupta, A. 1992. Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics Of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 6-23

¹⁵ Ferguson, J., Gupta, A. 1992. Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics Of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 6-23

Although such concepts are suggestive because they endeavor to stretch the naturalized association of culture with place, they fail to interrogate this assumption in a truly fundamental manner. We need to ask how to deal with cultural difference while abandoning received ideas of (localized) culture. (1992, P.6-23.)

Vichoke's analysis of the 10 categories, in particular 1.1, 3 and 9 provides an excellent and accurate overview of the development of Thai art, of importance to my project. Vichoke provides greater clarity in terms of the influence that Thai art history has had on my own work.

Due to the relation of space, place and culture as Gupta and Ferguson (1992) assumed, has led me to question the idea of my culture, that informs my character, my identity, and my style of art work, As I have spent a lot of time studying abroad, two and a half years in London, four years in Auckland, New Zealand, and recently up to four years in Melbourne, Australia.

It is useful to describe my particular position as a transnational artist, associated with the place (Australia) and its culture, in which my spiritual development might be influenced by locality, that I will consider further through the investigation of other practitioners such as New Zealand artist Colin McCahon, in chapter 4 of my exegesis.

My research also shows that displacement and loss of identity may be a state of mind and that through a continuum of images and spiritual feeling one can transcend the sense of isolation in a new home.

Supporting Material: *Searching for self-awareness no. 2 and no. 3*

Searching for self-awareness no. 2



Figure 6: '*Searching for self-awareness no. 2*', 60 x 80 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas, 2009

Searching for self-awareness no. 2 and no. 3 began with my identity. My style of painting is figurative representing serenity and peace of mind within God's love among the labyrinths symbolizing life and the problems that we cope with in the real world and its chaos. In this case, the new context being in a new land, Melbourne, Australia leads me to the interpretation of my inner land, my spiritual experience among new experiences within a multicultural city to represent my identity.

In *Searching for self-awareness no. 2*, I create a story symbolising the status of my confusion of being Thai with Buddhist background and the conversion to Christianity through the image of myself surrounded by the labyrinth with the use of Buddhist and Christian symbolism.

The Symmetrical composition is used to symbolize myself connected with the observer inviting them into my inner land. In other words, attracting people with a focal point and leading them deep into my stories. The size of main figure also plays a crucial role in how I would like people to explore my world, through the process of telling a story.

I created constructed labyrinths over three levels to once again present the core principles in both Buddhism and Christianity, which include the three beliefs in Buddhism, his teaching, the monk, and God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit in Christianity. I designed a new style of container combining organic and geometric forms that show a sense of the use of symbolism in Buddhism such as the lotus, to identify my background.

On the foreground of the painting I created a space, the gate to represent the journey through my inner world, through constructional labyrinths. Passing the first small figure in the lotus-like container, representing the status of the beginning, born with Buddhist influences, then moving forward to reach me in the middle of a place (symbolized as the middle of nowhere). I positioned myself sitting in the distorted lotus-like container with one eye opened, to symbolize the state of mind while I became a new believer and paralleled the meaning of being in a in-between situation located in Melbourne. This represents my embarking: the new context with both a Buddhist background and my recent belief in Christianity.

Influenced by Thai Traditional Art, I used Thai mural painting and divided the section of each story with separate related stories of ancient Buddhist myths. To represent meaning I use a triangle or triangular shape, or linear qualities in painting to separate the three levels of constructed labyrinths. I intend to centralize the audiences' perception and observation within a particular area of the painting.

The container that symbolizes my body (the container of soul) presents the limitation of freedom, whereas the figures represent my soul which is full of God's Holy Spirit, the red shirt I wear symbolized serving God, Christ, and the reflection of God's images as a way to show my reflection to him.

According to New Testament, 2 Corinthians 4: 17-18;

17 Now the lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

18 But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being Transformed into the same image from glory, just as by the spirit of the Lord.

The labyrinth shows my path captured by constructed design to symbolize a particular time and place of my context. In addition, the ladder plays a crucial role to signify the idea of escaping from sin. I use the ladder to give a sense of Christ's suffering on the cross, his release to the ground as well as the representation of Saint Jacob who had a vision of the ladder to the heaven. The cross symbolises redemption, and the Christ is also in the essence of the symbols I used in this painting. In terms of colour, green represents the victory of life to death and the meaning of mercy and the rebirth of spirituality, yellow represents holy God and his sacred image and it symbolizes the betrayal, Red symbolises the power of God, love and hate, all colours are foundational through this research. Interestingly, my own analysis of this painting may be provided a hint of identification of Thai-ness, and this is investigated further in the next project.

Professor Rowley spoke of style within the Principles of Chinese painting as,

Vitality of spirit may be lost by too much actuality or by too much stylization (Professor Rowley 1947, as cited in Waterbury, F. 1959. Reflections on Style. *Artibus Asiae*, 22(1/2), 193-198).

Waterbury (1959) argued that:

One may say that 'style' may also be lost by too much actuality or too much stylization. But since stylization is, it seems to me, the process in which a depicted object assumes an aspect, which is symbolic of itself (p.193-198).

'Style' will always be nearer to stylization than to actuality, as the important things in both, in the last analysis, are the essential intangible qualities (Waterbury, F. 1959. Reflections on Style. *Artibus Asiae*, 22(1/2), 193-198).

Reading Waterbury's works lead me to an advanced investigation through my studio practice in the next painting, *Searching for self-awareness no. 3*.

Searching for self-awareness no. 3



Figure 7: 'Searching for self-awareness no. 3', 45 x 120cm, acrylic and pen on wood, 2010

Responding to the knowledge and symbolism of Buddhism and Christianity and its transformation to images within in contemporary art, I further investigate the process of my recent paintings through their documentation in order to address issues regarding my identity with spirituality and my role as an artist and researcher. Figure 7-'*Searching for self-awareness no. 3*' is concerned with Buddhist and Christian symbols, such as the begging bowl (monks bowl), lotus flower, labyrinths, ladder, and self-portrait. In addition, I used a limited palette with the incremental brush-stroke, and defined the form with a pen. I was interested in the content of self- awareness within spirituality related to the idiom 'whether you are underneath in any religion, you're still the sinner doing some mistakes'.¹⁶ This led me to convey the portraits of myself in the painting as three separate states to distinguish the similarities and differences of when I was under Buddhist influence and being part Christian. I was interested in experimental presentation using the mirror to reflect and create a new impact on audience's observation and the visualisation of my identity.

¹⁶ Religion-online (1997), *Reinhold Niebuhr by Howard G. Patton, Chapter 3: Man the sinner*



Figure 8: Sketches; acrylic and pen on paper (found object related to Thai culture: from left; First: image from Chao-Pra-Ya river, Bangkok, Second to Fifth: images related to monk, Buddha's image and Thai traditional dance), various dimensions, 2010

In *Searching for self-awareness no. 1*, I completed a series of sketches, which were developed into small paintings, made for *Searching for self-awareness no. 2*.



Figure 9: *Searching for self-awareness no. 3*

Through the process of painting I learnt that colour was very important to control and provides a unity of picture surface, to show an interpretation of my emotional expression. In addition, the symbols I used represented more tangible and contained clues of my identity within spirituality.

I had managed to create a path in research through my painting by presenting the balance of Thai traditional art and the symbolism of Buddhism and Christianity. Using the designed direction of a constructed background to separate each scene (each series of portraits) my paintings were similar to Thai mural wall-painting, where scenes are distinguished by line and directions. Texture created by incremental brush-strokes in the portraits created a new phenomenon of techniques and potential to further my research through painting.



Figure 10: Fragment of *Searching for self-awareness no.3*, texture was created by incremental brushstroke

I replaced the cylinder container in previous works with the begging bowl (within the lotus flower and without it) to symbolise my state of mind underneath Buddhism and its influences on my current context. This also symbolised meaning as sin container and the fantasy of my mind.

In order to analyse my research project and search for alternative methods, I began exploring the process of using fragments and transparency, photo copying of sketches and digital printing to produce new works as seen in the series of '*the reflection of spirituality*'.

Project 3: The harmony of spirituality related to displacement and location:

Supporting Material: *Searching for self-awareness no. 4 to no. 6*

Searching for self-awareness no. 4



Figure 11: '*Searching for self-awareness no. 4*', acrylic and pen on paper, 50 x 65 cm, 2010

In project 3, I started a series of paintings to investigate the use of integral symbolism of Buddhism and Christianity through my personal experiences, spiritual, cultural hybridity, and the multiculturalism within the new context, Melbourne, Australia.

Here, the exploration of my spirituality is related to Theravada Buddhism's teaching of the 'four noble truths'. This teaching encourages individuals to achieve nirvana as Buddha did. This involved leaving behind the material world to live an ascetic life, creating a way to overcome suffering, and finding the way to

enlightenment. The first truth of Buddhism is: everything is suffering; the second, that the origin of suffering is desire; the third is the existence of nirvana where suffering will be ended; and the last, a path that leads to nirvana, the way in which Buddha's teaching should be applied (Bass, D. 2001. Self-Guided Gallery Tour on Buddhist Art at the UMFA, *UMFA: Utah Museum of Fine Arts*, 65).

Paralleled, in the New Testament, there are many similarities between Buddhist and Christian idioms.

Including instructional parameters, leading to a belief in eternal life.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest anyone should boast.

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.¹⁷

As a result of my conversion, I have come to understand that there are clear parallels in the teachings of the two religions. The Buddhist's eight-fold path involves thinking and acting kindly towards others and striving to understand the Four Noble Truths. The New Testament presents a doctrine with similar core values:

You shall love The Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with your entire mind...You shall love your neighbor as yourselves.¹⁸

These Buddhist and Christian Doctrines lead to my core beliefs that informed my spiritual development. In this project, I study spiritual transformation in the images in order to investigate the process my spiritual growth through art, in order to address my identity.

I also study Thai Contemporary art:

Modern Thai art has its own unique process of development, which contains a denseness of structure and complexity of moral experience. To

¹⁷ BibleGateway.com (1982). *New king James Version: Ephesians 2:8-10*. Retrieved from <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+2&version=NKJV>

¹⁸ Biblos.com (2004). *American Standard Bible: Luke 10:27*. Retrieved from <http://nasb.scripturetext.com/luke/10.htm>

signify its meaning, artists need to find the appropriate forms that combine the unique process and signs to express its processes which represent Thai identity and ethics (Sethaseree, T. 2011. The Po-Mo Artistic Movement in Thailand: Overlapping Tactics and Practices. *Asian Culture and History*, 3(1), 31-45).

Sethaseree (2011) also asserted that 'Thai artists not only create works of art to address the issues of aesthetics, but try to present the moral aspect within institutional domains' (p.31-45). This later changed after 1990s and led to emerging alternative art, such as installation practice, mixed media, and conceptual art as Sethaseree (2011) stated that:

This creates a political dialogue that can be critically understood in terms of the process of cultural hybridity that gives rise to something different, something new, transitional and unrecognizable-a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation taking place-in Third space (p.31-45).

This kind of space is politically practical because it is a productive space of the construction of culture as different, in the spirit of alteration or otherness embedded in everyday idioms of artistic practices in various fashions (Sethaseree, T. 2011. The Po-Mo Artistic Movement in Thailand: Overlapping Tactics and Practices. *Asian Culture and History*, 3(1), 31-45).

In this project, my negotiation of meaning and representation took place as the tool to draw attention to the formation of my identity, my hybrid identity. For instance, Buddhist symbolism signifies Thai-ness or at least introduces the oriental background to Western observers. My perspective of the new land's institutions, and environment are indicated by my portrait, in this case, the displaced position of myself, and plays a crucial role in the process of investigation. Through the interconnection of Buddhist Thai identity and the mixed style of Western and Eastern surfaces in my painting I introduce myself- as-other to the local audience and its multicultural perspectives. In other words, I'm positioning my cultural identity as differing from the local.

My identity can be metaphorically investigated through the term of “Siwilai”¹⁹ referred in modern Thai culture, while Thailand positioned her self to global perspective during the colonised era. Whereas, Peter A. Jackson (2008) mentioned that:

Siwilai was a constitutively hybrid creation that borrowed enough from Western sources to create a performative “effect” of modern ‘civilisation’ in the eyes of foreign observers, while also drawing sufficiently from indigenous paradigms to make it recognizable to the Siamese populace as a local form of power linked symbolically with the country’s past (p.147-170).

Bhabha’s account of siwilai, cited by Jackson (2008), as the mimicry of influenced culture, which is different from the origin, creates what Bhabha explains as a third space. I suggest this third space could be Thai’s siwilai in the way that it plays a significant role to express Thailand and its exoticism and civilized status to the world as Penny Van Esterik (2000), cited by Jackson (2008) asserted;

With no direct colonial master, Thailand was not close enough to Europe or important enough for Europeans to attempt to control the way Thailand represented itself. No colonial office dictated or crafted Thailand’s public face (p.147-170).

Thailand learned from European texts and expositions how to represent her own past and present in a way that demonstrate her exoticism and civilized status simultaneously (Jackson, P. A. 2008. Thai Semicolonial Hybridities: Bhabha and Garcia Canclini in Dialogue on Power and Cultural Blending. *Asian Studies Review* 32(2): 147-170).

What is the culture of people who live a life of border crossing such as migrant workers, nomads, and members of the transnational business and professional elite, but the relation of different cultures to a dominant culture within the same city same particular space? Multiculturalism is inclusive of cultural difference within a

¹⁹ See Jackson, P. A. (2008). Thai Semicolonial Hybridities: Bhabha and Garcia Canclini in Dialogue on Power and Cultural Blending. *Asian Studies Review*, 32(2), 147-170

locality (Gupta, A. & Ferguson, J. 1992), and gives a rise to my identity and its relationship to a particular local space.

Finding ways to deal with this relationship of culture and space²⁰ leads me to the appropriation of siwilai 's concept as a metaphor to describe my identity and situation through the series of paintings (series of *Searching for self-awareness* no.4-6).

I created *Searching for self-awareness* no. 4, to investigate the balance of the use of both Buddhist and Christian symbolism, but with less emphasis on Christian symbolism. I focused on the use of Buddhist symbolism such as begging bowl to represent the state of mind, especially in the past and continuing to the present.

I wanted to simplify my background and foreground of the picture with my portrait to symbolise my spiritual status, my conversion to Christianity. In doing so, it raised a question relating to the lack of the use of Christian symbolism. I wanted to experiment and play with understatement, the absence of a clear sign and symbol to signal the symmetric in order to characterize my style as mentioned in project 2.²¹

From project 2, I used limited symbols to reduce the inner form of my feeling. In other words, 'less is more', is used to symbolise my Identity as a displaced Thai artist.

²⁰ See, Gupta, A., Ferguson, J. (1992). Culture: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference. *Cultural Anthropology*, 7(1), 6-23

²¹ Waterbury, F. (1959). Reflections on Style. *Artibus Asiae*, 22(1/2), 193-198

Searching for self-awareness no. 5



Figure 12: '*Searching for self-awareness no. 5*', 2010, acrylic and pen on canvas, 30 x 30 cm (each panel)

During *Searching for self-awareness no. 5*, I found that my methods were becoming limited and I needed more freedom to carry on producing painting, to remind me of the concept of Thai-ness which King Vajiravudh, King Rama VI mentioned.

Imitation in thought, speech, or deed is a characteristic of a slave [that] and so is antipathetic to Thai-ness. Being free or Thai, means that we can choose to think and do as we please (Asvabahu, 1961, p.4, cited in Jackson, P. 2008. Thai Semicolonial Hybridities: Bhabha and Garcia Canclini in Dialogue on Power and Cultural Blending. *Asian Studies Review*, 32(2), 147-170).

These words reminded me of Thai identity, I began painting each panel searching for the appropriate drawing. These can be observed in the final image as a combination of drawing and painting in order to symbolize the transformation of the state of mind at a particular time focusing on a specific context. Instead of concentrating on the completion of each panel, I played with representation and harmony.

As Jackson asserts that harmony is Thailand's ability to observe and apply outside civilized culture to harmonise her own development in terms of both culture and

politic, whereas the act of 'swallow and change, absorb and apply' play the important role to define the feature of Thai cultural identity (2008, p.147-170).

In *Searching for self-awareness no. 5*, I continue the exploration of my spiritual experiences in Melbourne. The effects of being out of place both, being out of Thailand and being displaced in Melbourne lead to a confusion of my identity. The unclear status of being a Thai artist within the Buddhist background and conversion to Christianity, increased my sense of displacement. I asked myself, how could I create work to present my inner feelings through painting? I started with a set of drawings on canvas, primarily painted with yellow ochre, to find a settlement in my mind, similar to how I felt when I first arrived in Melbourne.

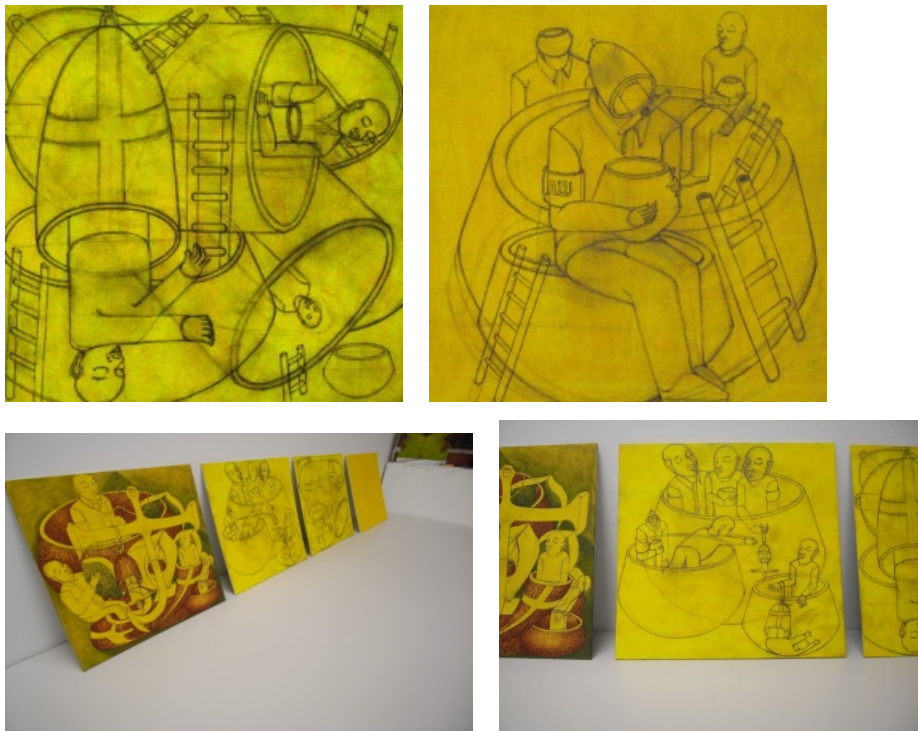


Figure 13: fragment drawing of searching for self-awareness no. 5

The use of Buddhist and Christian symbolism can be seen as the bell shape containers, which represent sound, a reminder of both religions. The begging bowl as the containers of soul (not the body as seen containing the figures in physical images), ladders to symbolise the way that good-doers utilize to escape from sin (sin that is caused by the desire of our body-flesh and skin). The hook as the device to harvest more believers to follow, and the geometric form of lotus's leaf shape-like symbolises my early Buddhist background. I created a harmony of this

painting through the rhythm of a spiritual state, in each small panel to signify the rhythm of my life. Not only representing a state of mind in each panel, but also to symbolise the way that I try to connect with my new cultural context with a bridge of dominance and pluralism as mentioned by Kraidy (2005) as related to Bhabha and Canclini's perspective of hybridity, whereas the sign of empowerment and a symptom of dominance play the interesting role on identity issue (Jackson, P. A. 2008. Thai Semicolonial Hybridities: Bhabha and Garcia Canclini in Dialogue on Power and Cultural Blending. *Asian Studies Review* 32(2), 151).



Figure 14: the experimental representation in the process of searching for self-awareness no. 5

Searching for self-awareness no. 6



Figure 15: '*Searching for self-awareness No. 6*', Acrylic and pen on yellow paper, 50 x 60cm, 2010

'*Searching for self-awareness no. 6*', is a further investigation of spirituality, I interpret the influence of religious hybridization through my spiritual growth. Providing a picture of my spiritual meaning through a metaphorical explanation of Thai religious hybridization, which played the crucial role in this exploration as Pattana (as cited in Jackson, 2008) believed,

Religion in contemporary Thailand is as a multi-faceted site where hybridisation does not simply mean the conventional coexistence and tolerance of various religious components, but a temporal moment and site of contestation for spiritual meanings and relevance (Pattana, as cited in Jackson, 2008, p.147-170).

Within Bhabha's postcolonial analysis of a semicolonialism perspective and Pattana's research of Thai popular culture and religion, Peter A. Jackson (2008) argued that:

Contemporary Thai religious hybridization is a form of cultural mixing involving contestation and resistance, then we need to ask what is being contested and who is being resisted. The hegemonic power here is not a foreign colonial regime but the Thai state itself, whose modernizing policies in the twentieth century centralized religious and cultural authority in an officially defined Theravada Buddhism hostile to folk animism (p.147-170).

As the consequence of this movement, Pattana (as cited in Jackson, 2008) noted that:

The hybridization of contemporary Thai religion has drawn on "the discipline technologies and the politics of body and soul in order to produce a new sense of religiosity underneath what seems to be the authority and surveillance of state-sponsored Buddhism (p.147-170).

This civilized politic-cultural movement not only demonstrated the concept of anti-westernisation and Thai cultural purity, but the idea of a domestic relation which is a part of a hybrid mimicry that Thai elite signalled as the double signs of dealing with Western culture and ruling the local population.²²

The ability of cultural blending with oriental Thai and Western beliefs signifies Thai identity occurring in my project.

In '*Searching for Self-awareness no. 6*', the issue of identity simultaneously represented my positioning within a dominant culture. The mixed cultural representation is the illustration of the layering of my beliefs, which have developed through my state of displacement.

As can be seen in my research, the use of Buddhist and Christian symbolism is blended into a harmony, becoming the state of self- realisation, in terms of my background and recent conversion. The use of begging bowl is the device to

²² Jackson, P. A. 2008. Thai Semicolonial Hybridities: Bhabha and Garcia Canclini in Dialogue on Power and Cultural Blending. *Asian Studies Review*, 32(2), 147-170

describe a story in which the layers of my beliefs are presented through the position of each begging bowl. From foreground to background, their position (3 states) represents each moment of my life in a particular time and relationship. In the past, my spirituality can be understood by Buddhist influence but now it is decreased, and is more of a sense of nostalgia (as represented by the stand-alone begging bowl at the background). During my journey of life, a way of life is influenced by both religious teachings (but mainly Christianity) as conveyed by the figure in the begging bowl holding the bell shape container, as with the begging bowl, 3 levels connected by ladders and their direction, from the top (the head of main figure without the physical head but instead represented by the small figure in the begging bowl). In the foreground, the begging bowl is standing and is related to the main figure, as a focal point, this can be described as the meaning of life in each particular time (present and future) and its transformation and relationship to the present phenomenon influencing the future.

This painting responds to displacement, and association with the locality through my inner sense of identity. An understatement which responds to local audiences, to lead to the question of the artist's positioning among his new land and how he is being accepted or not. My aim was to signify myself in the painting for people to consider me as a part of multicultural society.

I speak of the absence of a physical figure, the figure without face and hands is shown to indicate both my beliefs influenced by Buddhism and Christianity. Similar ideas of invisibility were referred to by Diana Bass (2001), in Buddhism before literal representation of the Buddha as human image or anthropomorphic image, believers considered the Buddha image as invisible due to his sacred and sublime presence.²³ I believe the Buddha's invisibility drew attention to his teaching not his status, towards enlightenment and nirvana. In the New Testament, people were created similar to the Lord's character and image. This lead me to the idea of being human and experiencing sin as shame, which should not appear as a physical identity as could reduce His holy power or sacred and

²³ See, Bass, D. (2001). *Self-Guided Gallery Tour on Buddhist Art at the UMFA*. Retrieved February 5, 2011, from UMFA: Utah Museum of Fine Arts: Retrieved from http://centralpt.com/upload/417/9995_ArtasStorytellerLessonssm.pdf

sublime status. In other words, I wanted to blend both religious influences to characterise my identity.

As stated in The New Testament, to define my spiritual identity through the use of symbolism,

Having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God, which lives and abides forever.

Because all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower fall away.

But the word of the Lord endures forever. Now this is the word, which by the gospel was preached to you. (1Peter 1: 23-25)

The invisible body as presented in my painting symbolise the meaningless of our mortal body (flesh and skin) while the clothes (green uniform with red 'A& W' badge symbolise the soul of believer) and represent the immortal truth of God's word by believers. Nevertheless, in this image, I left some appearance of hands to demonstrate how sin exists within our body.

The idea of displacement has played a hidden role through my use of symbolism. Being invisible within the visible world (my understandings of Western society), feeling meaningless and out-of-place within the society. My individual experience of the social norm and the relationship between myself and the local community, may be similar to what Friedhelm Mennekes (1998) mentioned, 'In all cultural phenomena, both art and religion are an integral part of human reflection in terms of spirituality as enormous variety of form used to express their feeling'.²⁴

Signs and symbols can be used to interpret people's understanding of their personal experience. Though, meaning of symbols may be shared across particular cultures, personal experience might assume multiculturalism.

²⁴ Mennekes, F. (1998), *Review in Beyond belief: Modern art and the religious imagination Catalogue: Interconnection: religion and art*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne



Figure 16: fragment of '*Searching for self-awareness no. 6*', details within the figure

Chapter Four: Project Four

Spiritual Identity

Introduction:

In this project I embarked on an experimental investigation in order to respond to my research aims:

To develop a variety of digital techniques such as image overlay and mirror imaging that can be extended into paintings and other works.

To develop exhibition formats, such as multiple panel works, 3 dimensional shallow box constructions and multiple formatting as installation ideas.

Project 4: Spiritual Identity: Inner Land, and the overlay of memories 1 - 3, a case study of Colin McCahon and other relevant theories.

People's experience of life is also shaped by other people they meet. Paul Ricour (1913-2005), cited by Dantonel, (2007) mentioned the consideration of individual identity should not only consist of act and potency of each person,²⁵ but also the consciousness, the relationship between a person and others as community and the ability to utilise any institutions' tools such as rules, laws, traditions, and morals. (Dantonel, 2007: p.17-47)

In 2007, Rev. Dantonel Jean-Marie concluded that,

People can develop by: first, consciousness and self-realisation in order to be their own decision maker and responsible to themselves and society, second, relationships with others through respect and realisation of difference of individual identity, third, capability to utilise society's rules in order to develop themselves and contribute to the community. With this understanding, people may understand human life and development as key to reach this life's goals. (p. 46)

²⁵ Act as the philosophical term is the status of being of the person; for instance, Paul is a boy, etc. Potency as the philosophical term describes the potential of person, which can be or developed to be, for example, Paul has a potential to become artist, etc

History is related to time and human development. History is the process that provides the tangible insight of how humans develop themselves through time. This can be observed through technology and science innovation and their effects on society (Hegel, as cited in Dantonel, 2007). Processes of history suggest the relationship of time as part of modern philosophy in the way people develop and learn new things. (Dantonel, 2007,p. 54-55)

The formation of identity is related to personal experiences, external events, and individual perspective. The relationship between each person with another and its association with specific time and space are part of understanding identity.

Each person is different, and is influenced by both the present and future. For instance, experiences of the past may influence the present. Personal experiences to other people and society shape a persons sense of identity. While the future has not occurred it may be influenced by events, activities, and behaviour or decision making.

Each person's activities in the present may result in the future's outcome. I believe we prepare for the future through current actions. Dantonel explained this as, 'the fear that drives us to realise that life is the history not an event which accidentally happens while it leads us to a metaphor of life, it is the relationship between past, present and future of individual experiences that identify a person' (Dantonel, 2007, p.55-56).

Such philosophy combined with my experience of time and space led to the production of project 4's studio practice. The Spiritual Identity: inner land, The Spiritual Identity: the layer of memories no.1-3, reflecting my concept of life's journey. My artworks present, doubt in life, different world perspectives, and identity through spiritual and cultural influences. They are divided into three parts, past, present, and future, as with other spiritual art practitioner's such as Colin McCahon.

I believe the significant goal in life or the completion of life's journey is to continually develop until reaching a nirvana or a state of becoming closer to God. However, I believe people cannot reach a nirvana without association with a religion or belief. However I believe knowledge, freedom, and self-being can be fulfilled through relationships with other people. (Dantonel, 2008, p.33)

I developed project 4 through the layering of memories, and through the analysis of previous works. Project 4 was also developed through a case study of other art practitioners, especially Colin McCahon, a New Zealand artist whose works are associated with faith and belief.

I worked through the process of experimental practice such as drawing, painting, digital printing, sculpture, and image overlay (as shown through in Figures 14) which resulted in addressing the issue of my identity as seen in latest works such as *Spiritual Identity: Inner Land*, and *Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories No. 1 to 3*.

Supporting Material: *Spiritual Identity: Inner Land*, and *Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories 1 - 3*.

Spiritual Identity: Inner Land



Figure 17: '*Spiritual Identity: Inner land*', 2011, 45 x 120 cm (triptych), acrylic and pen on wood

The creation of '*Spiritual Identity, Inner Land*', Figure: 17 occurred through my studio practice and represents the metaphor of personal experience, self-passage or the journey of life in order to present my inner land or layer of memories.

As mentioned in James Elkins's *Pictures of the body: pain and metamorphosis*, the images of body may represent two major meanings. First is the symbolism of sensation, pain, and death. Second is the symbolism of mind related to painless projection, transformation, and metamorphosis (1999: x), I am interested in the body's representation, posing in order to symbolise the concept of being, belonging, having, or existence. In other words, self-images that tell the story of my journey of life from past to the future in three stages which may be associated with Elkin's theory of pictured bodies.

The combinations of Buddhist and Christian symbolism, and personal signs and symbols have played a crucial role in this artwork. The use of begging bowl, bell,

lotus flower, and labyrinths present my Buddhist background, the use of ladder, cross (as observed through the posing of figure) identify my conversion to Christianity, and the use of self image, self awareness along with the use of symbolism of colour (yellow, red, orange, green) show the references from both Buddhist and Christian iconography in order for the pictorial structure to support the content of personal iconography representing my spiritual and cultural identity.

Through the use of metaphysical empty figures as an image of the body, the personal symbol may lead to meaning in this painting. In other words, the interconnection between spirituality and art has developed and transformed into my coded messages. The messages introduce the idea of being as a person or human or the meaning of life and its development associated with Dantonel's philosophy of life and Elkins's meaning of pictured bodies.

The status, the development, or the transformation of life is presented not just through the use of designed representation as a triptych, but in each panel, which is divided into 3 stages from foreground to background. In addition, Buddhist teaching relating to the life circle, Birth, Pain, and Death can be seen in my work, similar to Elkins's Pictured bodies.

Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories No. 1 to 3.

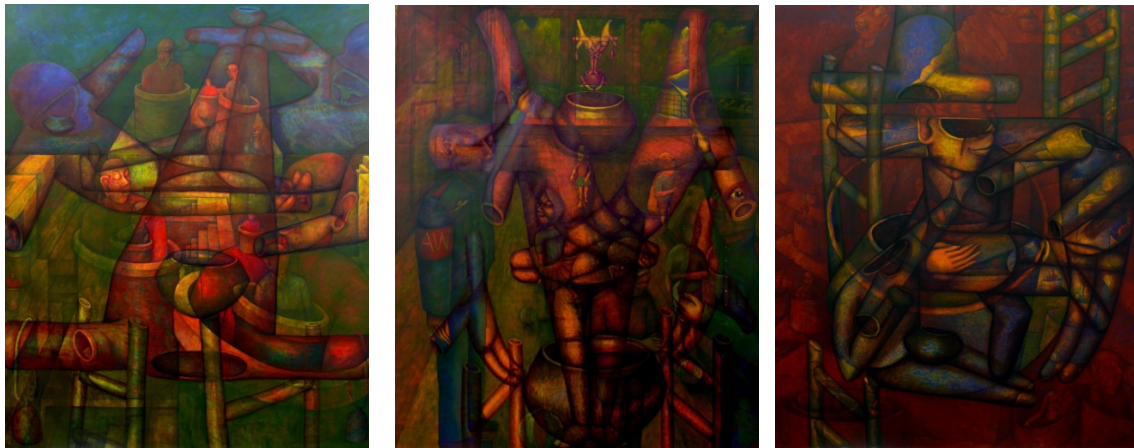


Figure18: '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.1-no 3*', 2012, 150 x180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas.

The series of painting, '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories*', represent my existence and the exploration of cultural dislocation of being Thai living in Australia. The transformation and metamorphosis associated with Elkin's body theory symbolise the mind, related to pain, projection, transformation, and metamorphosis.

The introduction of new techniques played a significant role in the form of the body. My aim was to present a state of mind influenced by the effects of my new experiences. New experiences of places can provide new sources for artists to develop new styles. Individual identity grows through new local influences. Identity as otherness is tangible, visible, and tactile in terms of cultural differences and similarities. I use the dynamic posing figure to symbolise the idea of multiculturalism, hybridity, and cultural movement. Local experiences transformed my mind and spiritual development, this can be visualised through the figure, related to my experience of transcendence, my spiritual connection to God.

The narrative and pictorial structure that appeared in my previous work became fundamental layers represented by transparent dynamic designed bodies to symbolise the layer of memories. The use of Buddhist and Christian symbolism remained. Such as Begging bowl, ladder, and bell, along with the symbolic use of colour, the same as in previous paintings but now darker to highlight the foreground figures to symbolise the recent fresh layers of memories. Open-mind

and spirit, love and sharing is the hidden second layer of these paintings combined with the idea of devotion, salvation, humbleness, and self-realisation. The posing figures provide references regarding crucifixion. The figures related to crucifixion symbolise self realisation regarding human limitation and its relationship with religion, faith and belief that leads to knowledge and understanding about life and how life can be developed spiritually and physically paralleled with the relationship between people in each community. It is the use of narrative and symbolism to demonstrate the idea of how my life as an artist has developed through each stage to provide references regarding spirituality, cultural identity and the relationship to the locality and sense of place.

‘Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories No.1-3’ combines past techniques to represent my personal experiences of faith and belief. The use of selected Christian symbolism of colour is combined with the personal symbolic iconography such as labyrinth, and the container to create the metaphor of my past life. My journey of life while living in Thailand in 2007-2008 and believing in Christianity, love and sharing are important concepts to this work. The dynamic figures are introduced to represent recent memories. My development as an artist grew through spiritual and cultural experiences of the local community. For instance, the floating empty figures symbolise a container of the spirit or soul, shells of people, and or spiritual vessels replace the use of containers in previous work. The use of empty figure instead of a visible figure references spiritual existence and its transformation. The layering of memories can be observed through the overlay imaging and transparency combined with the introduction of Buddhist symbolism the begging bowl to address the issues of identity. In this work my understanding of Thai identity, spirituality and art are clarified to show how faith and belief may be transformed into images.

The process of project 4 and its development



Figure 19: '*The reflection of spirituality no.2*', 2010, 140 x 160 cm, digital print



Figure 20: '*The reflection of spirituality no.3*', 2010, 140 x 160 cm, digital print



Figure 21: '*The reflection of spirituality, 2010*', 160 x 180 x3 cm, mixed media



Figure 22: '*Spiritual identity: Inner lands Reflection*', 2010, dimension variable, ceramic

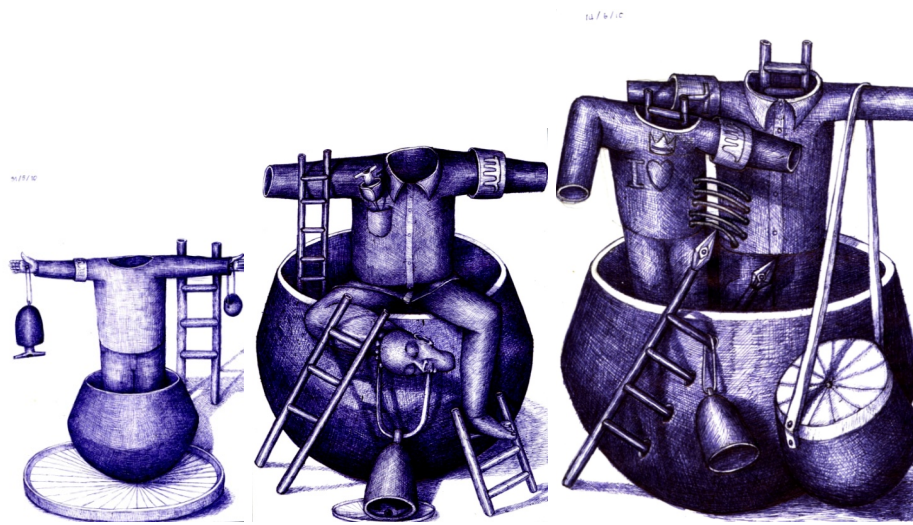


Figure 23: Experimental drawing

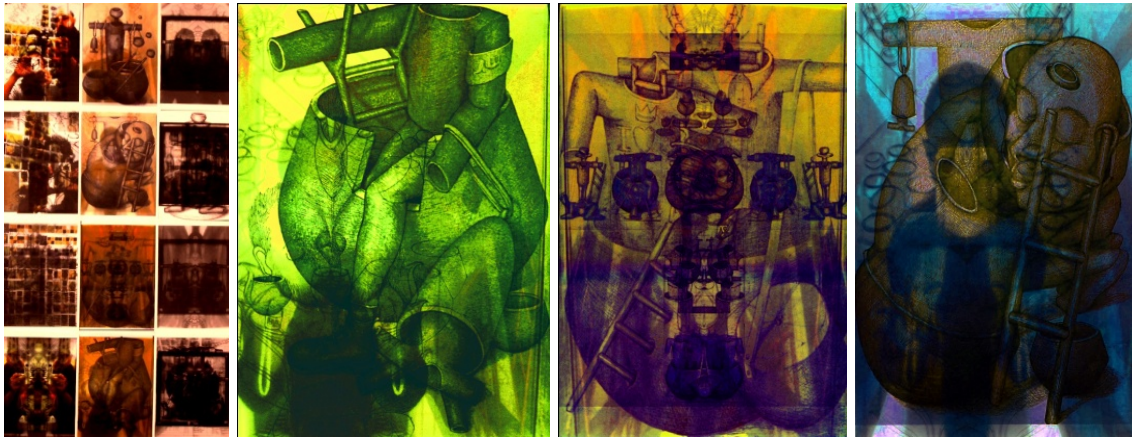


Figure 24: overlay imaging experimental practices



Figure 25: '*Spiritual Identity: Inner land*', 2011, 45 x120 cm (triptych), acrylic and pen on wood



Figure 26: '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.1*', 2012, 150 x 180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas



Figure 27: '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.2*', 2012, 150 x 180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas



Figure 28: '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.3*', 2012, 150 x 180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas

Case Study: Colin McCahon

In order to place my research in a contemporary context, that relates to my investigation, I have selected New Zealand born artist Colin McCahon as a key artist. His work exemplifies a search for spiritual identity and a personal use of language in which to express universal humanist concerns. Colin McCahon is one of the significant artists that I am researching in regard to spiritual expression through painting. In this chapter, I will discuss McCahon's spiritual search, its influences and the relevance of his work in relationship to my own practice.

There is... a very special relationship between the artist and the public, but his most important contribution to this relationship is not himself but his art (P.A. Tomory, 1957).²⁶

Colin McCahon wanted to see art as a part of human life. Art should be understandable and reachable, and for McCahon, art should be concerned with balance of the artist's expression and religious art representation to enhance the human condition with the imaginative awareness (Brown, 1993).

According to Tim Garrity²⁷, McCahon has given new meaning to the New Zealand landscape tradition through presenting its physical presence. This is a unique contribution to the art of New Zealand.

²⁶ See P.A. Tomory, "Looking at art in New Zealand", in *Landfall* 46, vol. 12 no. 2, June 1958 p. 159.

²⁷ See T. Garrity, *Art New Zealand* 8, Nov-Jan 1977-8 p. 47.

Through the conversation between Thomas Crow²⁸ and curator Marja Bloem²⁹ related to Colin McCahon's works; in particular the exhibition titled '*A Question of Faith*' I found something significantly interesting that led me into the appreciation of McCahon's themes of the spiritual journey. McCahon deploys the use of convention and the relocating of events in the painter's own time and place. Bloem described her first impression and association with Colin McCahon's work through the work titled '*Beach Walk: Series C (1973)*', she was impressed by the quality of seascape as in the Dutch traditional seascape painting with the same kind of light, sense of sea such as surf and the air, it's Auckland: Muriwai-a specific black sand beach where his studio is located, more importantly what she found personal was the metaphor of life that McCahon expressed through the painting of landscape.

Bloem (2003) asserted that:

It echoes that English tradition of taking long walks and using them as allegories-you might compare it to the work of Richard Long. McCahon is a modernist, but one on the periphery. His daily life triggered metaphorical thoughts, human doubt but also affirmation, in a language he had to invent himself, something totally different than anything I had come across before. His painting is a religious painting but depicted in the different way, unlike Medieval or Renaissance, which are history, his work is reality. Moreover, he is a simply undoubting believer, but not that kind of a fundamentalist (Bloem. M. 2003, as cited in Crow. T. 2003. Spreading the word [Interview]. *Artforum*, 42(1), 198-200, 203, 254, 261).

He just used the language of religion to express his own doubts and his own passage in time (Crow, 2003).

Bloem described McCahon's passion in expressionist painting, which he employed in the beginning of his career. In a painting from 1950, '*Six days in Nelson and Canterbury*', Bloem (2003) highlighted that,

²⁸ Thomas Crow is director of the Getty Research Institute and a contributing editor of *Artforum*

²⁹ The curator who organized the Colin McMahon's Exhibition titled "A Question of Faith", originated at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, November 15- January 18, 2004, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

He is striving to create an image of the passage, the journey, but he doesn't really yet know how to do it. The painting looks like a filmic sequence, but it's definitely the biblical six days of creation, so in that image he already conflates the passage of time (Crow, 2003).



Figure 29: “*Six days in Nelson and Canterbury*”, Colin McCahon, Oil on canvas, 885 x 1165 mm, 1950, NZmuseums³⁰

© Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust

Talking about McCahon work, Gordon H. Brown (1993) highlighted,

Colin McCahon's intention to communicate is clear and strong with the peripheral idea related to religion, which was difficult to categorise within the current dominant style in New Zealand art. McCahon's work which can be seen as the traditional or a radical invention, which has made him the most influential contemporary artist working with the spiritual theme.

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http://www.nzmuseums.co.nz/account/3236/object/1404/Six_days_in_Nelson_and_Canterbury#!prettyPhoto

And also Marja asserted,

It was McCahon's interest in the question of life and death, the possibility of salvation that led him to the development of his work through the use of text and landscape, which he deploys constantly as a thread through all his work. Unlike the idea of the modernist, Cezanne who concentrated on how to represent images on a flat surface, McCahon reacts differently as he experiments using words and landscape. This can be seen in his painting depicting the story of Lazarus. McCahon's breakthrough comes from the specific use of the repeated sequencing of imagery to create different voices in the work. The use of communication and non-communication is an innovative method in much of McCahon's output (Crow, 2003).

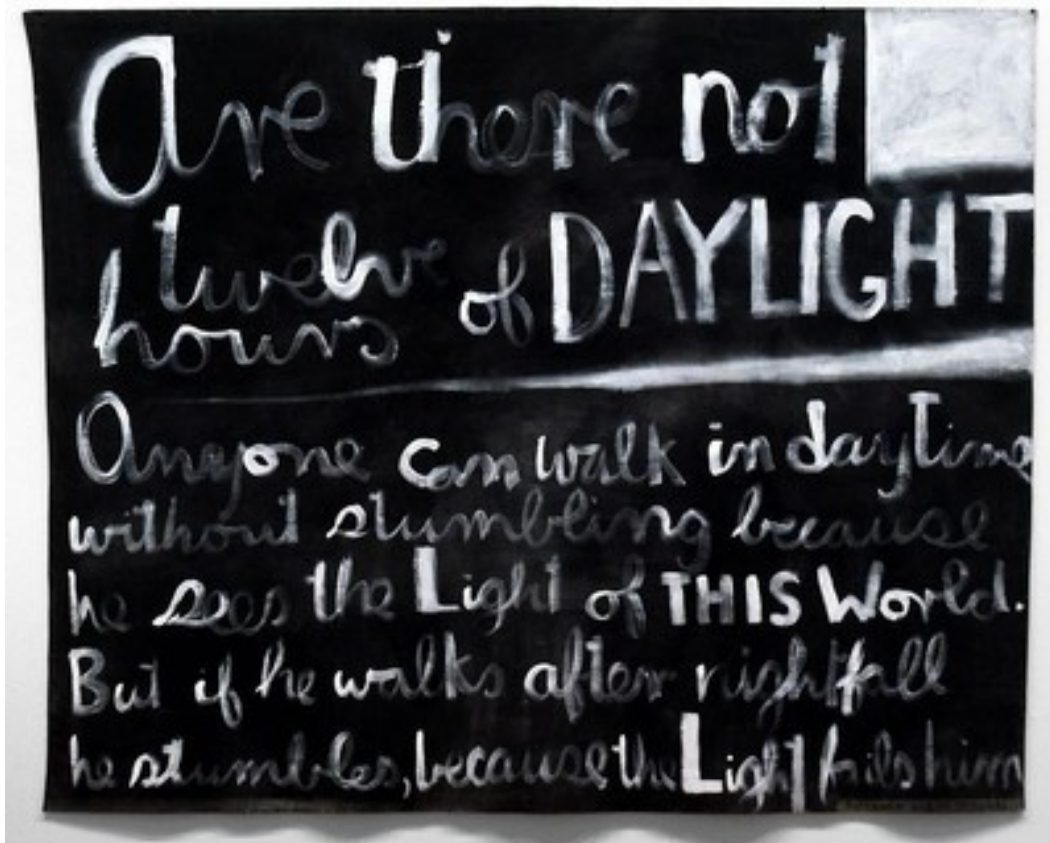


Figure 30: "Are there not twelve hours of daylight", Colin McCahon, acrylic on canvas, 2070 x 2600 mm, 1970, NZmuseums³¹

© Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust

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http://www.nzmuseums.co.nz/account/3236/object/1405/Are_there_not_twelve_hours_of_daylight#!prettyPhoto

There may be similar starting points in my own practice that have affinity with McCahon.

I am also concerned with how to express my spiritual concerns through imagery and the use of traditional religious imagery.

Wystan Curnow (1984) said that McCahon's work may fit in between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art/ Post-Painterly Abstraction which belong to the late 1950s, but McCahon does something different through the use of both convention and innovation of personal codes such as words and numbers within his iconography which is concerned with death, the death of God that refers to Christ's death on the cross.

Brown (1993) suggested,

Even though, there are some difficulties working with a religious theme however, McCahon succeeded in being such an artist through three important factors. First, his strong wish to become a professional artist, second, the ability to combine the ideas of being in the real world and its effects, or the problems that western civilization is facing with the spiritual desire, last, his point of view as the follower and doubter that he always saw himself as St Thomas³² McCahon desires to create a sense of universal human salvation through his art.

McCahon employed the early Christian art desire of text and image as well as 14th century combination of text and speech through scrolls, used like speech balloons in comic book art, yet coming from the mouths of angels. His painting '*King of the Jews*' is a good example.

³² See St. Thomas, Retrieved from http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=410
He was a Jew, called to be one of the twelve Apostles. He is best known for his role in verifying the Resurrection of his Master



Figure 31: 'The King of the Jews', Oil on cardboard mounted on hardboard, 63.6 x 52 cm, 1947

© Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust

High art and low, past art and present, turning both ends against the middle-this was part and parcel of a cultural strategy.

The strategy of relocating of Biblical events in the artists' own time and place as evidenced in the work of English painter, Stanley Spencer³³ and Thai, Sawai Chinnawong³⁴, is also seen in the creation of the Crucifixion scene in Nelson, New Zealand.



Figure 32: 'Resurrection, Cookham', Stanley Spencer, Oil on canvas, 2743 x 5486 mm, 1924-7

© Tate London 2012

³³ See Crumlin, R. (1998). *Beyond belief: modern art and the religious imagination*, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria 0724101993...

English spiritual artist, Stanley Spencer, whose work is concerned with the reflections of Christ on particular scriptural passages based on his own life and experiences, which is the allegorical interpretation related to the conceived scheme of his own village to a church-house. Much of his work is concerned with the personal relationships between God and artist in a particular time.

³⁴ See ART AT OMSC website. Retrieved from <http://omsc.org/art.shtml>

Sawai Chinnawong, of Payap University, Chiang Mai, Thailand, is Thai Christian Artist who well known in Asia for his portrayals of Biblical imagery in a traditional Thai graphic idiom. He was the Paul T. Lauby artist in residence at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in 2003-2004, and was one of five artists featured in the 2007 exhibition, "The Christian Story: Five Asian Artists Today" at the Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) in New York City.



Figure 33: Left: “*The Lost Son*”, Sawai Chinnawong, Acrylic on canvas, archival mount, glazed museum frame, 20 x 27 in., 2004. Right: “*The Lost Sheep, The Good Shepherd*”, Sawai Chinnawong, Acrylic on canvas, archival mount, glazed museum frame, 26.5 x 18 in., 2003

© Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA)

This strategy reinforces the idea that the suffering of crucifixion ‘cannot but be part of our experience too’. (Curnow, 1984) This can also be paralleled with many depictions of 1st century religious events where the protagonists are shown wearing 14th century clothing to ground the experience in the audiences’ time and place to make the narrative more accessible and meaningful.



Figure 34: “*The Crucifixion*”, Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro), Tempera on wood, gold ground, 25 1/8 x 19 in. (63.8 x 48.3 cm), 1395–1455

© metmuseum.org³⁵

McCahon like many early Christian artists wishes to communicate images that are able to be read by an audience, yet at the same time be poetic and spiritual and concerned with universal concerns such as duality-black and white-light and shadow, good and bad, life and death. This coupled with the use of Italian primitive painting composition and text is unique in the history of Contemporary New Zealand Art.

For example as stated by Crow (2003),

At the beginning of his career, he was out side or behind the development of modernism. At the end of his life, he was far advanced, because he was dealing with questions that we are only understanding now, at least in the visual arts. We have a problem with the Bible because our times are so secular. On the other hand, if you can really understand the Bible, it's just a

³⁵ <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001453>

system to explore and explain things you don't really understand or don't know how to express. That's what McCahon was trying to do.

Crow (2003) continues to mention visual symbolism as a powerful instructive force to express religious messages.

In my perspective, I believe Colin McCahon defies categorisation in terms of art movement. McCahon is in some ways like an outsider artist in terms of his innovative practice, he is depicting his personal conversation with God and communicating what he believes are universal truths.

McCahon's invention of personal codes, use of text, numbers relating to the bible, light and shade, fragmented narratives, are all devices that although highly personal and steeped in his faith are also evidence of his desire to communicate, the search for spirituality in contemporary life.

'Given that McCahon ceased painting and experienced a sense of personal turmoil and intense reflection, is one way to assume that life is the endless question, the search for spiritual identity' (Brown, 1993)

In response Bloem commented,

The story is that he used to go to his studio and sit around. You can follow his decline because he chose to write his doubts on the canvas, in the painterly way, using texts from Ecclesiastes. Yet you still see little fragments of landscape or light, so it is not just text. It becomes clear how he increasingly gives up hope (Crow, T. 2003. Spreading the word. *Artforum* 42(1), 198 - 200, 203, 254, 261).

Crow (2003) asserts McCahon's faith was gradually becoming less intense, through his painted works. From his early work full of faith, to the last painting where faith seems to be disappearing McCahon stated that it would be better never to have been born.

McCahon's use of words and numbers and abstract signs in the late 1950s and reached the highest level of potential after 1966 when he was commissioned by the Auckland Convent to decorate the clerestory window and the cycle of the stations of the cross for their chapel. Crow asserted that:

He realized that the stations follow not only an anecdotal story but also the same idea of the sequence, of the passage of time, and that each station is just one moment for reflection. It's not so important exactly what happens in the story; it's more that you think about what happened in one life (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

In early 1960s, McCahon becomes involved in Catholicism. Through Catholicism he started to combine his fascination with numerical ordering systems, signs and symbols, in order to create a mood rather than facts. Marja asserted that:

This is another respect in which he is different from Newman, because Newman's stations have no actual relation to what is being represented. The canvas is just a place to express "the human cry" (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

Regarding the use of quotation McCahon used in his work, Bloem resisted the word 'quotation' because she thought it carried an intellectual exercise, she highlighted that McCahon uses the quotation in different sense; she explained:

It is his real life I mean, it's as if you make a painting of a tree; you wouldn't call the tree a 'quotation'. The tree is there, and you see it all the time and you live with it (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

Bloem (2003) concluded that using quotation for McCahon it is his intention to communicate to public the through his own invention of a form of language not as an intellectual exercise.

Talking through the quotation of McCahon, '*I will need words*' Bloem (2003) expanded that it comes from the association between McCahon and his partner, the poet, John Caselberg who supported him in terms of texts for the major paintings on the threat of nuclear warfare. In addition, Marja tells us that McCahon's achievements in using texts in painting is his ability to transform writing into painting that create meaning unlike the collagic based early twentieth century artists who used text to make aesthetic and anti-aesthetic statements. Furthermore, Marja added that McCahon is always concerned that the language he uses has influence and direct connection to society.

McCahon borrows from the Bible as related in the '*Elias*' Painting, Bloem (2003) explained,

'*Elias*' Painting is the first in a series of paintings that show his mature style. The evidence is shown through texts he chooses in the series of painting, '*Elias*', such as '*WILL HE SAVE HIM/ LET BE/ LET BE/ WILL ELIAS/ COME TO SAVE HIM/ EVER/ NEVER*' and '*WAS IT/ WORTHWHILE/ WILL/ COULD/ ELIAS/ SAVE HIM/ SAVE HIM*' and '*ELIAS/ WHY/ CANNOT / CAN'T HE/ SAVE/ HIM/ HIMSELF*'.

Bloem suggested that McCahon focuses on these texts because he is concerned about doubt and all the possibilities of misunderstanding (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

Marja (2003) discussed McCahon's association with other artists from Europe and or America in order to respond to McCahon art in relation to artists such as Beuys, Newman, and Rothko. New Zealand art was in a transitional stage where external influences from Europe and American were prominent. This caused many New Zealand artists to be influenced by new ideas and to question their own artistic identities. Marja also commented on McCahon's individuality,

He knew everything by reading and seeing reproductions, and it was something totally different for him when he finally had the experience of seeing the real painting. He also visited Allan Kaprow's studio and saw a performance by him, which was enormously important for McCahon, equally as important as seeing Pollock and the work of Mexican muralists on the same trip to New York. (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

McCahon's approach was to look at medieval art and the idea of storytelling. McCahon tried to give the New Zealand landscape new meaning by using letters and numbers³⁶.

Commenting on McCahon and his use of white - on - black, unstretched canvas Bloem (2003) stated, it's the line of creation, white is the colour of light which symbolizes the light of life at the time, he makes himself really clear about

³⁶ Crow, T. (2003). Spreading the word. [Interview]. *Artforum*, 42(1), 198 - 200, 203, 254, 261

religious references such as Moses striking water from the rock along with other references, such as William Hodges.³⁷

In 1964, McCahon considered his paintings weren't connecting with the public because they were too intellectual. As Thomas Crow had also suggested, Bloem highlighted that,

But, in the certain way, what you point out is exactly what I tried to do with this exhibition, to show that aspect, because I think that's the most important in McCahon. His way of painting and thinking is definitely a reduction, and every painting is like a first. He remained a colourist too, with black itself being as much a colour for a painter as any hue (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

Through my studio practice I searched for my style, in Faith and belief: the assembly of love no.1-4, by my graphic or comic style, a limited colour palette, red, yellow, green, the use of pen (layers of lines as brushstroke) to define and harmonise form and colour³⁸, derived from my personal experiences and ideas concerning my relationship between art and religious influences.

Through my research into selected symbols of Buddhist and Christian spiritual belief I learnt how to portray my spiritual identity as a visual language through applying a graphic style of significant form in order to establish my artistic direction.

The use of pen (defining form by lines) creates a solid figurative character with limited colour and incremental brushstrokes provides an interesting texture that seems to combine, movement with peace and order and may be seen as a reaffirmation of early Thai sculptural form.

³⁷ William Hodges, the official painter on Captain Cook's second voyage, whose 1775 painting of a New Zealand waterfall

³⁸ Traditional Thai painters had 5 primary pigments (tempera colours), the close equivalents of scarlet lake, ultramarine blue, pipe-clay white, yellow ochre, and pot-black: In terms of Thai Buddhist Architecture, there have been some identified colour influences such as, the mixture of multitiered ochre, blue, orange, and green tiled roof.
Retrieved 5th February 2011 from [http:// www.thailandcentral.se/Tart.html](http://www.thailandcentral.se/Tart.html)

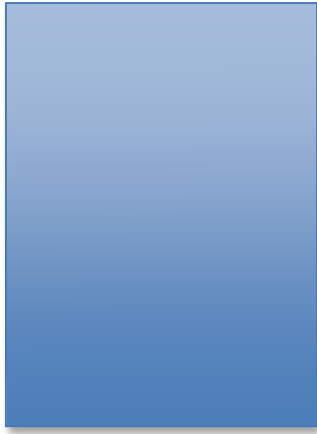


Figure 35: 'Standing Buddha', 8th–9th century; Mon style
Thailand, Bronze with high tin content, or silver alloy, H. 15 1/2 in. (39.4 cm)

Due to © restrictions image not shown.

Available at [http:// www.scholarsresource.com/browse/work/2144612698](http://www.scholarsresource.com/browse/work/2144612698)

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Thomas Crow (2003) concluded that McCahon is on the periphery of modernism, he achieved his own language as the metaphorical device to express how he copes with human doubt (life and death) and affirmed it with his faith.

How did Colin McCahon succeed in being one of the most influential artists working with spiritual theme? What were the influences that informed Colin McCahon's identity?

During childhood McCahon regularly visited galleries with his family, painted and made drawings.

Subsequently, McCahon learned to observe the landscape and expressed it as through a bird's eyes view. I believe this work may have influenced later works that symbolised God as Brown suggested,

McCahon's eye appears to have slid past Woollaston's expressionistic assertiveness, with its serrated rhythms, to concentrate on the paintings' underlying structural order and simplicity of form. Certain features, so excitedly discovered, were transferred to his own landscape (Crow, 2003, p 200, 203, 254, 261).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This research based project focuses on the investigation of the complexities of my spirituality and its relationship to Thai identity and culture in order to develop my painting. This investigation responds to the research questions through the knowledge and symbolism of Buddhist and Christian belief and their transformation to images within the context of contemporary art. Through research and experimental practices including the use of narrative, symbolism of colour, pictorial structure and concept has led to a new understanding of what has affected my painting and its processes of development. My research has clarified the outcomes of this project and provided new or at least re-considered knowledge in the production of art that addresses issues regarding my identity within my spiritual self. It has contributed to my understanding of my role as artist and researcher.

Through this research based project I have investigated the complexities of my Buddhist background and its relationship to my recent conversion to Christianity and the impact on the transformation of the imagery in my painting. This research project demonstrates how faith and belief can be a significant source for painting. The project analysis helps to answer the question of how artists create spiritual art through the process of thinking, studying, and observing which can be a case study for any artist who is interested in identity and religious symbolism and seeking a suitable way to produce his/her own work in terms of the methodology for making spiritual art.

In addition, this research project addresses issues regarding my identity within my spiritual self and provides me with relevant spiritual understanding in my role as an artist and researcher. My research also extends the potential for the use of symbolism, particularly personal religious iconography within contemporary Thai art. This investigation also continues the debate concerning aspects of traditional and contemporary Thai art in a regional and global context. The research project also extends the lineage of artists utilizing religious symbolism and extends the debate on the use of personal symbolism and its ability to communicate universal concerns.

My research aimed to answer the following research questions.

- 1 How can the knowledge and symbolism of Buddhist and Christian idioms be depicted in contemporary art?
- 2 How can images of traditional Thai Art be transformed into a contemporary visual language?
- 3 In what way can spiritual beliefs be tangible through the painted image?
- 4 In what ways can I represent my personal experiences of conversion from Buddhism to Christianity through painting?

In theoretical research, I found that the investigation of individual identity and its relationship with life's development, cultural and religious influences, and context time and space, provide fundamental sources and knowledge and leads to the understanding of self-awareness or self-realisation, which clarifies identity. The character of being Thai and its strength to blend Western culture into Eastern and to apply it into their own lifestyle identifies Thai-ness. Thai identity may be seen as an integration of Eastern and Western ideas. The coherence common to both Buddhist and Christian teaching or doctrine leads to self understanding in terms of faith and belief, and my spiritual development has grown through time with the influences of both religions. Once again, self-realisation in terms of spirituality has signified Thai identity in which cultural blending has played a significant role. In Colin McCahon's exploration, the knowledge of how an artist creates their artwork through the use of a spiritual source, and transforms their faith and belief into images demonstrates similarities, with my research project. The completion of this research based project can be observed through the outcomes of paintings in response to the issue of my identity in terms of cultural, spiritual influences.

In my practical research, the series of paintings, *Spiritual Identity: Inner Land*, and *Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.1 to 3* and related works directly reference and clarify concepts of my identity.

In the process of practical research, from project 1- project 4, the concepts of transformation and metamorphosis has occurred, the pictorial development of

concepts through searching for self-awareness via the use of layering of memories provides a solution of how artists produce their artwork in order to answer the research question related to personal experiences. The transformation of faith and belief to images is depicted in the context of contemporary art, which provides the clues related to Buddhist and Christian symbolism along with a personal perspective on philosophy of life, and Thai identity.

Even though this project is completed, the continuation of research will be ongoing with enthusiasm in order to constantly produce further opportunities to understand one's existence and my position in the art world in relationship to reality and spiritual context (as seen in Figure 36).



Figure 36: '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.4*', 180 x150 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas, 2012

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©www.M.C.Escher.com

Figure 2: '*Faith and belief, assembly of love no1-4*', 2007-2008, 150 x 180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas

Figure 3: '*Searching for self-awareness*', 2009, 150 x 180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas

Figure 4: image of sculptural work of '*Temple of Champa*', which dates back to the seventh century

© <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3249157>

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© First image: "Review and Artworks of Silpa Bhirasri", Art Centre, Silpakorn University, 2002 pp. 28. Second Image:

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Figure 29: '*Six days in Nelson and Canterbury*', Colin McCahon, Oil on canvas, 885 x 1165 mm, 1950

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Figure 30: '*Are there not twelve hours of daylight*', Colin McCahon, acrylic on canvas, 2070 x 2600 mm, 1970

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Figure 32: '*Resurrection, Cookham*', Stanley Spencer, Oil on canvas, 2,743 x 5,486 mm 1924-7

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Figure 33: Left: "*The Lost Son*", Sawai Chinnawong, Acrylic on canvas, archival mount, glazed museum frame, 20 x 27 in., 2004. Right: "*The Lost Sheep, The Good Shepherd*", Sawai Chinnawong, Acrylic on canvas, archival mount, glazed museum frame, 26.5 x 18 in., 2003

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Figure 34: "*The Crucifixion*", Fra Angelico (Guido di Pietro), Tempera on wood, gold ground, 25 1/8 x 19 in. (63.8 x 48.3 cm), 1395–1455

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Figure 35: Standing Buddha, 8th–9th century: Mon style Thailand, Bronze with high tin content, or silver alloy, H. 15 ½ in. (39.4 cm)

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Figure 36: '*Spiritual Identity: the overlay of memories no.4*', 150 x 180 cm, acrylic and pen on canvas, 2012

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